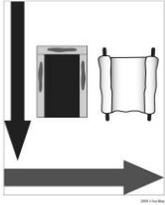


Week Ten: A Clash of Kingdoms - Numbers 22-25



Overview

Israel has weathered the internal threats posed by Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses' leadership and by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram's rebellion. The nation has failed the test of faith in sending spies into Canaan and rejecting Joshua and Caleb's minority report. They walk under judgment, doomed to wander forty years in the wilderness.

Moses has failed the test of honor in striking the rock and not hallowing God in front His people, and Aaron has died. Early victories against Canaanites at Hormah and against Sihon, king of Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, indicate that God still fights on behalf of His people, and the incident of the bronze serpent has provided a picture of God's forgiving grace in the face of Israel's rebellion.

At the time of this story, Israel's forty years of wandering are nearly finished. Moses is soon to conduct a second census of the people, which will demonstrate God's faithfulness (preserving their numbers) and thoroughness (the entire previous generation, with the exception of Joshua, Caleb, and Moses, has died). After this census, Moses will preach his last sermon, Deuteronomy, and Israel will enter the land of promise without him.

One trial remains for God's people, however: their victories have put fear into the heart of Balak, king of Moab, and he seeks out a sorcerer's power to counter this fear. Today's lesson will focus on the clash of kingdoms as an earthly king seeks to hurt the people of the Heavenly King.

Lesson Objective:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to identify three types of attack that face God's people and will be able to apply truths from this story to the attacks they face in their own lives.

Key Truths

Every generation of God's people faces social/political, spiritual, and moral threats.

Spiritual warfare is real, and God fights unseen battles on behalf of His people.

When God's people allow earthly kingdom values and activities in their midst, they forgo God's protection and invite God's judgment.

Sexual sin and idolatry go hand in hand and always cost more than initially advertised.

Lesson Outline

Since the Fall, man has struggled with three consequences of sin: fear, guilt, and shame. Because Adam and Eve were afraid, they hid; because they were ashamed of their nakedness, they tried to cover themselves with leaves; and because they were guilty, they attempted to prove their innocence by blaming others. Every culture on earth deals with fear, shame, and guilt, attempting to control fear by acquiring power, to cover shame by acquiring honor (or killing the source of shame), and to cover guilt by excusing sin, blaming others, or legalizing wrongdoing.¹

When Balak sees Israel's victory over the Amorites, he becomes "exceedingly afraid of the people because they [are] many, and Moab [is] sick with dread because of the children of Israel" (Num. 22:2). How does he counter this fear? The way the kingdoms of this world counter fear—by acquiring power. He seeks out Balaam son of Beor, a diviner whose fame Balak acknowledges—"I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (22:6). Balak sends elders of Midian and Moab as envoys to Balak, and immediately the story enters the realm of an unseen battle, an unusual God, undimmed blessings, and, sadly, a spiritual failure of unholy people.

1. An unseen battle - Ex. 23:27; Num. 22:1-21.

This spiritual conflict occurs entirely outside of Israel's camp. Nowhere does the text indicate that the camp of Israel is aware of Balak's scheming or Balaam's sorcery. Several observations arise at this point:

- Moab's fear is a direct result of God's promise to His people in Exodus: "I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you" (23:27). Moab's fear, even expressed by their wicked actions, indicates God's control of the situation, and, because God has ordained the fear, He has also obligated Himself to protect His people from Moab's actions.
- This spiritual conflict does not require a physical battle. God responds to the threat in kind. Balak's desire to curse Israel contradicts God's promise to Abraham, "I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). God has obligated Himself to bless Israel; by extension He must frustrate the curses of their enemies.
- When Balaam finally goes with Balak's envoys, he only goes because God finally permits it, and only under constraints: "only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do" (22:20).

2. An unusual God - Num. 22:22-41; 23:1-6, 11-17, 25-30; 24:1.

Diviners, mediums, and devotees of other gods (representatives of earthly kingdom people) have always sought to manipulate spiritual forces by means of magic,

¹ An idea developed by Roland Muller in *The Messenger, the Message, the Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter*, Altona, MB, Canada: Canbooks, 2010. Also available online through rmuller.com.

sacrifices, bargaining, or other actions. Balaam and Balak are no different. Balak honestly thinks that, because of Balaam's personal power, he can pay the diviner to change God's mind about His people. God teaches several lessons about Himself as He interacts with Balaam:

- His purity: "And the Angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me'" (22:32). Unlike Balak, the spirits, or the gods of the nations, God does not respect or respond to sorcery; in fact, He despises it.
- His authority: God interrupts Balaam's journey to Balak by sending the Angel of the LORD to rebuke him and by speaking through Balaam's own donkey. He has power to intervene at any moment, by any means. God also warns Balaam: "The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live" (22:33). Balaam cannot control this situation by whatever power he has used in the past; in contrast, his very life depends on God's mercy.
- His will (22:40-41; 23:1-5, 11-19, 25-30; 24:1): Once God has obligated Himself to bless, He cannot be induced to curse. Balaam clearly knows something about how God operates, because he approaches Him with seven sacrifices each time he seeks to curse Israel, but he has failed to grasp the purpose of sacrifice—to come to God God's way, by the blood of the innocent on behalf of the guilty. He combines sacrifice with sorcery (24:1) to summon God. He repeats this process twice (22:40-23:6; 23:13-17). When he realizes that he cannot manipulate God (unlike the spirits or the gods of the nations), he waits for God to speak a third time (24:1), and God speaks a fourth time without Balaam's use of sacrifices. After the first failure to curse Israel, Balak seeks to manipulate the situation to get a different result, moving Balaam from place to place in hopes that, the fewer Israelites he can actually see, the more likely God will allow him to speak a curse. But God is not like men (23:19) or like the gods of the nations. He has bound Himself to His people, to protect them, defeat their enemies, multiply them, and bless them.

3. Undimmed blessings - Num. 23:7-12, 18-24; 24:2-25.

Every time Balaam seeks to curse the people, God puts a blessing in his mouth.

These blessings include:

- "Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel?" (23:10). This echoes God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 13:16) and Jacob (28:16).
- "The LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a *King* is among them" (23:21, emphasis added).
- "For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done'" (Num. 23:23).
- "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob Your dwellings, O Israel Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens by the riverside, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters. He shall pour water from his buckets, and his seed

shall be in many waters. His *king* shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted” (24:5-7, emphasis added).

- “I see Him, but now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult” (24:17).

Several times, God mentions a king in His blessings, but Israel has no king. In an absolutely amazing turnaround, God not only uses Balaam to bless where he had intended to curse, but God also pronounces a promise of the King to come—Jesus. Who is in control of this situation? Who is protecting and blessing His people? Who has their future in mind, even in the faces of scheming enemies?

4. Unholy people - Num. 25; Revelation 2:14.

During this entire story, God has been protecting His unsuspecting people against political (Balak) and spiritual (Balaam) attacks. He has acted in total faithfulness to them, blessing as He had promised, thwarting the schemes of an earthly king, and giving them promises of the true King to come and defeat all of their enemies. But Israel, faced with the temptations of the Midianite women, fails the test of holiness and so invites God’s judgment on them. God’s default position is to bless His people, but He cannot and will not bless sin.

According to the Book of Revelation, Balaam actually plans this moral attack: “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality” (2:14). Seeing that God will not allow him to curse Israel, he counsels Balak to trick Israel into calling God’s curse down on themselves by sending Midianite and Moabite women among them to invite Israelites to their sacrifices. Israelites attend these celebrations and join with the nations in bowing down to their gods. In particular, they join themselves to Baal of Peor, provoking God to anger. The atmosphere of rebellion in the camp is so thick that Zimri, son of Salu, a Simeonite, takes a Midianite woman into his tent to sleep with her, directly in front of Moses and all Israel, right after God has ordered the death of each man who has participated in this evil. God sends a plague on Israel, and it kills 24,000 people before Phinehas the priest puts a stop to the plague by killing Zimri and the woman he’s sleeping with.

Balak’s main concern had been the sheer size of Israel and the fact that he couldn’t handle their numbers. Thanks to Israel’s own immorality, 24,000 of their own die. By their unfaithfulness, they fulfill what Balak had failed to accomplish by sorcery.

Application - What does this lesson teach us about God? Man? Sin? Redemption?

- People who live in fear seek power to manipulate others, their situations, and even God. Manipulation reveals a small view of God. A big view of God, when confronted with fear, relies on His power and walks by faith.
- God’s kingdom is always under social/political, spiritual, and moral attack. God is always fighting for His people.

- God is good, and His word is true. He can be relied on to keep His promises, even when His people can't see His hand at work.
- God's people step out from under the umbrella of his protection when they sin.
- Sin in the lives of God's people results in a loss of blessing and in logical consequences. It always costs more than initially advertised.
- Sexual sin and idolatry go hand in hand. Sexual sin is always symptomatic of idolatry, even when the idol isn't obvious.

Summary

God speaks to Balaam and fills his mouth with blessings for His people, including the promise of a King to come.

God acts by preventing Balak's desired curses.

God reveals that He cannot be manipulated by any human scheme. He reveals His holiness by dealing with sin in Israel's camp.

Discussion Questions

What are some social/political, spiritual, and moral attacks that God's people face today? What can we learn from this story about facing these kinds of attacks? Could it be that Balaam was not surprised by the donkey's speaking to him because he had had similar experiences while performing sorcery?

What do people's scheming and searching for power reveal about their views of God? How can we demonstrate a large view of God by refusing to scheme and manipulate?

What does God say about the Amalekites (24:7, 20-24)? How does this relate to Exodus 17:14-16?